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Official Records

95th plenary meeting
Friday, 18 April 2008, 11 a.m.
New York

President: Mr. Kerim ..... (The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia)

The meeting was called to order at 11 a.m.

Address by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI

Pope Benedict XVI was escorted into the General Assembly Hall by the President and the Secretary-General.

The President: It is an immense honour for me, as President of the General Assembly, to welcome the head of the Roman Catholic Church, His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI.

The word "*ecclesia*" stands for both an assembly and a church. Therefore, Your Holiness, allow me to express my sincere feelings of appreciation on behalf of the peoples of the United Nations *ecclesia* towards you as the supreme shepherd of all Catholics.

The month of April has an extraordinary meaning and significance in your life, not only because you were born on 16 April, but also because you were appointed Cardinal Bishop of Velletri-Segni on 5 April 1993 and elected Bishop of Rome on 19 April 2005, and your pontificate started on 24 April 2005. So, Your Holiness, I wish you a happy birthday and a happy anniversary.

In your message to the people of the United States, you described your visit as "a fraternal gesture towards every ecclesial community, and a sign of friendship for members of other religious traditions and all men and women of good will".

Your presence here today is a very powerful recognition of the validity and importance of international institutions, particularly of the United Nations. In a world full of controversies which can escalate into conflicts, violence and atrocities, the role of international institutions is without alternative. Effective multilateralism remains our goal so as to achieve peace and stability on Earth.

I am deeply convinced that the United Nations can count on your full support as the Holy Father of the Catholic community — a community of more than 1 billion people — in promoting a profound dialogue between cultures, peoples, nations and religions.

The visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to the United Nations provides a unique occasion to remind ourselves of our noble mission, as it is set out in the Charter,

> "to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and ... to practise tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbours,"

for tolerance is the foundation of freedom of the individual, including freedom of faith.

The essence of the United Nations agenda is development for all, based on equity and equality of all persons, as well as on global partnership. That makes the United Nations very valuable. A strong development agenda based on novel approaches to financing for development, environmental protection and achieving the Millennium Development Goals is a

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high priority for the United Nations in the decades to come.

This year is the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and, as Your Holiness rightly observed, "the need for global solidarity is as urgent as ever". The Declaration embodies the higher virtues of the human family; it compels us to move principled intentions to action that promotes human rights, human security, the responsibility to protect and more sustainable development. I believe that those are the pillars for a more just multilateralism — a new culture of international relations based on peace and tolerance, with the United Nations at its heart.

The new culture of international relations should have as its core principle the responsibility of all States, international and transnational institutions, as well as civil society and non-governmental organizations, to work together in solidarity in order to provide every individual with equality of access to rights and opportunities. Our moral and institutional obligation is to reshape international organizations to facilitate those opportunities.

In that regard, let me express my high appreciation for the valuable contribution of the Holy See to the work of the General Assembly, and in particular for your important role in promoting social justice, providing education and alleviating poverty and hunger around the world.

Your Holiness, we count on your continued blessing and support as we pursue our work.

I now give the floor to the Secretary-General.

The Secretary-General: I am deeply grateful to His Holiness for accepting my invitation to visit the United Nations — home to men and women of faith around the world. Your Holiness, welcome to our common home.

The United Nations is a secular institution composed of 192 States. We have six official languages but no official religion. We do not have a chapel, though we do have a meditation room. But if you ask those of us who work for the United Nations what motivates us, many of us reply in a language of faith. We see what we do not only as a job, but as a mission. Indeed, "mission" is the word we use most often for our work around the world — from peace and security to development to human rights.

Your Holiness, in so many ways our mission unites us with yours. You have spoken of the terrible challenge of poverty afflicting so much of the world's population and of how we cannot afford indifference and self-centred isolation. You have encouraged the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and called for progressive and agreed-upon nuclear disarmament. You have spelled out that those with greater power may not use it to violate the rights of others, and stated that peace is based on respect for the rights of all. You have spoken of water resources and climate change as matters of grave importance for the entire human family. You have called for an open and sincere dialogue, both within your Church and between religions and cultures, in search of the good of humankind. Finally, you have called for trust in and commitment to the United Nations. As you have said, the United Nations is "capable of fostering genuine dialogue and understanding, reconciling divergent views, and developing multilateral policies and strategies capable of meeting the manifold challenges of our complex and rapidly changing world".

Your Holiness, those are fundamental goals we share. We are grateful to have your prayers as we proceed on the path towards them.

Before leaving the United Nations today, you will visit the meditation room. My great predecessor, Dag Hammarskjold, who created that room, put it well. He said of the stone that forms its centrepiece:

> "We may see it as an altar, empty not because there is no God, not because it is an altar to an unknown God, but because it is dedicated to the God whom man worships under many names and in many forms."

Whether we worship one God, many or none, we in the United Nations have to sustain and strengthen our faith every day. As demands on our Organization multiply, we need more and more of that precious commodity.

I am profoundly grateful to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for bestowing some of his faith on us and for placing his trust in us. He possesses both of those in abundance. May we be strengthened by his visit today.

The President: I now invite His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to address the General Assembly.

Pope Benedict XVI (*spoke in French*): As I begin my address to this Assembly, I would like first of all to express to you, Sir, my sincere gratitude for your kind words. My thanks go also to the Secretary-General, Mr. Ban Ki-moon, for inviting me to visit the Headquarters of this Organization and for the welcome that he has extended to me. I greet the ambassadors and diplomats of the Member States and all those present.

Through you, I greet the peoples who are represented here. They look to this institution to carry forward the founding inspiration to establish a centre for harmonizing the actions of nations in the attainment of the common ends of peace and development. As Pope John Paul II expressed it in 1995, the Organization should be "a moral centre where all the nations of the world feel at home and develop a shared awareness of being, as it were, a family of nations" (*A/50/PV.20, p. 5*).

Through the United Nations, States have established universal objectives which, even if they do not coincide with the total common good of the human family, undoubtedly represent a fundamental part of that good. The founding principles of the Organization — the desire for peace, the quest for justice, respect for the dignity of the person, humanitarian cooperation and assistance — express the just aspirations of the human spirit and constitute the ideals which should underpin international relations.

As my predecessors Paul VI and John Paul II have observed from this very rostrum, all this is something that the Catholic Church and the Holy See follow attentively and with interest, seeing in your activity an example of how issues and conflicts concerning the world community can be subject to common regulation. The United Nations embodies the aspiration for a greater degree of international ordering, inspired and governed by the principle of subsidiarity and therefore capable of responding to the demands of the human family through binding international rules and through structures capable of harmonizing the day-to-day unfolding of the lives of peoples. That is all the more necessary at a time when we are experiencing the obvious paradox of a multilateral consensus that continues to be in crisis because it is still subordinated to the decisions of a few, whereas the world's problems call for interventions in the form of collective action by the international community.

Indeed, questions of security, development goals, the reduction of local and global inequalities, and the protection of the environment, resources and the climate require all international leaders to act jointly and to show a readiness to work in good faith, respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the planet. I am thinking especially of those countries in Africa and other parts of the world which remain on the margins of authentic integral development and are therefore at risk of experiencing only the negative effects of globalization.

In the context of international relations, it is necessary to recognize the higher role played by rules and structures that are intrinsically ordered to promote the common good, and therefore to safeguard human freedom. Those regulations do not limit freedom. On the contrary, they promote it when they prohibit behaviour and actions which work against the common good, curb its effective exercise and hence compromise the dignity of every human person.

In the name of freedom, there has to be a correlation between rights and duties by which every person is called to assume responsibility for his or her choices, made as a consequence of entering into relations with others. Here, our thoughts turn to the way the results of scientific research and technological advances have sometimes been applied. Notwithstanding the enormous benefits that humanity can gain, some instances of that represent a clear violation of the order of creation, to the point at which not only is the sacred character of life contradicted, but the human person and the family are robbed of their natural identity. Likewise, international action to preserve the environment and to protect various forms of life on Earth must not only guarantee a rational use of technology and science, but must also rediscover the authentic image of creation. That never requires a choice to be made between science and ethics; rather, it is a question of adopting a scientific method that is truly respectful of ethical imperatives.

Recognition of the unity of the human family and attention to the innate dignity of every man and woman today find renewed emphasis in the principle of the responsibility to protect. That has only recently been defined, but it was already implicitly present at the origins of the United Nations and is now increasingly characteristic of its activity. Every State has the primary duty to protect its own population from grave and sustained violations of human rights, as well as

from the consequences of humanitarian crises, whether natural or man-made. If States are unable to guarantee such protection, the international community must intervene with the juridical means provided in the United Nations Charter and in other international instruments.

The action of the international community and its institutions, provided that it respects the principles undergirding the international order, should never be interpreted as an unwarranted imposition or a limitation of sovereignty. On the contrary, it is indifference or failure to intervene that do the real damage. What is needed is a deeper search for ways of pre-empting and managing conflicts by exploring every possible diplomatic avenue and giving attention and encouragement to even the faintest sign of dialogue or desire for reconciliation.

The principle of the responsibility to protect was considered by the ancient *ius gentium* as the foundation of every action taken by those in government with regard to the governed. At the time when the concept of national sovereign States was first developing, the Dominican friar Francisco de Vitoria, rightly considered as a precursor of the idea of the United Nations, described this responsibility as an aspect of natural reason shared by all nations and the result of an international order whose task it was to regulate relations between peoples. Now, as then, this principle has to invoke the idea of the person as image of the Creator, the desire for the absolute and the essence of freedom.

The founding of the United Nations, as we know, coincided with the profound upheavals that humanity experienced when reference to the meaning of transcendence and natural reason was abandoned, and in consequence freedom and human dignity were grossly violated. When this happens, it threatens the objective foundations of the values inspiring and governing the international order and it undermines the cogent and inviolable principles formulated and consolidated by the United Nations. When faced with new and insistent challenges, it is a mistake to fall back on a pragmatic approach, limited to determining common ground, minimal in content and weak in its effect.

This reference to human dignity, which is the foundation and goal of the responsibility to protect, leads us to the theme we are specifically focusing upon this year, which marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That document was the outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws and the workings of society and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion and science.

Human rights are increasingly being presented as the common language and the ethical substratum of international relations. At the same time, the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights all serve as guarantees safeguarding human dignity. It is evident, though, that the rights recognized and expounded in the Declaration apply to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the person, who remains the high point of God's creative design for the world and for history. They are based on the natural law inscribed on human hearts and present in different cultures and civilizations. Removing human rights from this context would mean restricting their range and yielding to a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary and their universality would be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social and even religious outlooks. This great variety of viewpoints must not be allowed to obscure the fact that not only rights are universal, but so too is the human person, the subject of those rights.

(*spoke in English*)

The life of the community, both domestically and internationally, clearly demonstrates that respect for rights and the guarantees that follow from them are measures of the common good that serve to evaluate the relationship between justice and injustice, development and poverty, security and conflict. The promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups, and for increasing security. Indeed, the victims of hardship and despair, whose human dignity is violated with impunity, become easy prey to the call to violence, and they can then become violators of peace. The common good that human rights help to accomplish cannot, however, be attained merely by applying correct procedures, nor even less by achieving a balance between competing rights.

The merit of the Universal Declaration is that it has enabled different cultures, juridical expressions and

institutional models to converge around a fundamental nucleus of values, and hence of rights. Today, though, efforts need to be redoubled in the face of pressure to reinterpret the foundations of the Declaration and to compromise its inner unity so as to facilitate a move away from the protection of human dignity towards the satisfaction of simple interests, often particular interests. The Declaration was adopted as a common standard of achievement and cannot be applied piecemeal according to trends or selective choices that merely run the risk of contradicting the unity of the human person, and thus the indivisibility of human rights.

Experience shows that legality often prevails over justice when the insistence upon rights makes them appear as the exclusive result of legislative enactments or normative decisions taken by the various agencies of those in power. When presented purely in terms of legality, rights risk becoming weak propositions divorced from the ethical and rational dimension which is their foundation and their goal.

The Universal Declaration, rather, has reinforced the conviction that respect for human rights is principally rooted in unchanging justice, on which the binding force of international proclamations is also based. This aspect is often overlooked when the attempt is made to deprive rights of their true function in the name of a narrowly utilitarian perspective. Since rights and the resulting duties follow naturally from human interaction, it is easy to forget that they are the fruit of a commonly held sense of justice built primarily upon solidarity among the members of society, and are hence valid at all times and for all peoples. This intuition was expressed as early as the fifth century by Augustine of Hippo, one of the masters of our intellectual heritage. He taught that the saying "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you" cannot in any way vary according to the different understandings that have arisen in the world. Human rights, then, must be respected as an expression of justice, and not merely because they are enforceable through the will of the legislators.

As history proceeds, new situations arise, and the attempt is made to link them to new rights. Discernment — that is, the capacity to distinguish good from evil — becomes even more essential in the context of demands that concern the very lives and conduct of persons, communities and peoples. In tackling the theme of rights, since important situations and profound realities are involved, discernment is both an indispensable and a fruitful virtue. Discernment, then, shows that entrusting exclusively to individual States, with their laws and institutions, the final responsibility to meet the aspirations of persons, communities and entire peoples can sometimes have consequences that exclude the possibility of a social order respectful of the dignity and rights of the person.

On the other hand, a vision of life firmly anchored in the religious dimension can help to achieve this, since recognition of the transcendent value of every man and woman favours conversion of heart, which then leads to a commitment to resist violence, terrorism and war and to promote justice and peace.

This also provides the proper context for the interreligious dialogue that the United Nations is called to support, just as it supports dialogue in other areas of human activity. Dialogue should be recognized as the means by which the various components of society can articulate their point of view and build consensus around the truth concerning particular values or goals. It pertains to the nature of religions, freely practiced, that they can autonomously conduct a dialogue of thought and life. If at this level, too, the religious sphere is kept separate from political action, then great benefits ensue for individuals and communities.

On the other hand, the United Nations can count on the results of dialogue between religions and can draw fruit from the willingness of believers to place their experiences at the service of the common good. Their task is to propose a vision of faith not in terms of intolerance, discrimination and conflict, but in terms of complete respect for truth, coexistence, rights and reconciliation.

Human rights, of course, must include the right to religious freedom, understood as the expression of a dimension that is at once individual and communitarian — a vision that brings out the unity of the person while clearly distinguishing between the dimension of the citizen and that of the believer. The activity of the United Nations in recent years has ensured that public debate gives space to viewpoints inspired by a religious vision in all its dimensions, including ritual, worship, education, dissemination of information and the freedom to profess and choose religion.

It is inconceivable, then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves — their faith — in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one's rights. The rights associated with religion are all the more in need of protection if they are considered to clash with a prevailing secular ideology or with majority religious positions of an exclusive nature.

The full guarantee of religious liberty cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship but has to give due consideration to the public dimension of religion, and hence to the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order. Indeed, they actually do so, for example through their influential and generous involvement in a vast network of initiatives that extend from universities, scientific institutions and schools to health-care agencies and charitable organizations in the service of the poorest and most marginalized. Refusal to recognize the contribution to society that is rooted in the religious dimension and in the quest for the Absolute — by its nature, expressing communion between persons — would effectively privilege an individualistic approach and would fragment the unity of the person.

My presence at this Assembly is a sign of esteem for the United Nations, and it is intended to express the hope that the Organization will increasingly serve as a sign of unity between States and an instrument of service to the entire human family. It also demonstrates the willingness of the Catholic Church to offer her proper contribution to building international relations in a way that allows every person and every people to feel they can make a difference.

In a manner that is consistent with her contribution in the ethical and moral sphere and the free activity of her faithful, the Church also works for the realization of these goals through the international activity of the Holy See. Indeed, the Holy See has always had a place at the assemblies of the nations, thereby manifesting its specific character as a subject in the international domain. As the United Nations recently confirmed, the Holy See thereby makes its contribution according to the dispositions of international law, helps to define that law and makes appeal to it.

The United Nations remains a privileged setting in which the Church is committed to contributing her experience of humanity, developed over the centuries among peoples of every race and culture, and placing it at the disposal of all members of the international community. This experience and activity, directed towards attaining freedom for every believer, seeks also to increase the protection given to the rights of the person. Those rights are grounded and shaped by the transcendent nature of the person, which permits men and women to pursue their journey of faith and their search for God in this world. Recognition of this dimension must be strengthened if we are to sustain humanity's hope for a better world and if we are to create the conditions for peace, development, cooperation and the guarantee of rights for future generations.

In my recent encyclical, Spe Salvi, I indicated that "every generation has the task of engaging anew in the arduous search for the right way to order human affairs". For Christians, that task is motivated by the hope drawn from the saving work of Jesus Christ. That is why the Church is happy to be associated with the activity of this distinguished Organization, which is charged with the responsibility of promoting peace and good will throughout the Earth.

Dear friends, I thank you for this opportunity to address you today, and I promise you of the support of my prayers as you pursue your noble task.

Before I take my leave from this distinguished Assembly, I should like to offer my greetings, in the official languages, to all the nations here represented:

(*spoke successively in English, French, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese and Russian*)

Peace and prosperity, with God's help.

The President: On behalf of the General Assembly, I wish to express our deep appreciation to His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for his important and inspiring statement.

His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI was escorted from the General Assembly Hall by the President and the Secretary-General.

The meeting rose at 11.55 a.m.